

The Commonwealth of Universities

by

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Universities and Politics

- Universities have played an important role in the political culture of Europe and the West since the first universities worldwide were created c.1200
- Society has undergone radical changes in the meantime; in democratic regimes, political legitimacy rests upon a nation's citizens
- Universities have changed too (from traditional to research and eventually mass universities); even so, how have universities managed to carry out their political role in changed circumstances over the last eight centuries?

The Commonwealth of Universities

- Twofold thesis:
 1. Universities have an identity of their own; this identity rests upon the shared assumption that higher education plays (ought to play) a central role in the public debate
 2. This claim was the very reason for the creation of the first universities; it has been at the core of the universities' identity since then; universities are, thus, best described as a commonwealth in their own rights (i.e. a "commonwealth of universities")

Intellectuals and Universities

- Two assumptions:
 1. The history of European/Western higher education cannot be separated from the history of the intellectuals in Europe and the West
 2. Intellectuals have had an active understanding of their role in the history of Europe and the West since c.1200
- Significance: reassessing the critical potential of universities in Europe and the West

The argument

- My thesis will be demonstrated by showing that:
 1. The reason for the creation of the first universities can only be answered if we ask **what they were created for**; namely:
 - a) As an emancipatory response on the side of their stakeholders to twelfth-/thirteenth-century developments
 - b) As a response that aimed at emancipating the whole of society
 2. The intellectuals' active understanding of their role was the main reason **why the universities were created** and it has played this role every time European and Western societies were confronted with a legitimacy crisis and the intellectuals felt that they had to renew this ideal; the latter point will be illustrated by emphasising the importance of exile (as a reflection upon the exiled condition) in the debates over higher education in Europe and the West
- The thesis' significance will be briefly touched upon by showing how it challenges Antonio Gramsci's dichotomy between traditional and organic intellectuals as well as Jürgen Habermas's explanation of the origins of the public sphere

The Birth of the Universities: Facts

- The universities created at the beginning of the 13th century were all **corporations (*universitates*)**, starting with the oldest and more important ones at Bologna and Paris and with the exception of Naples and Toulouse, which were created by civil and ecclesiastical authorities respectively
- The initiative for the creation of *universitates* in higher education was taken by **two groups of stakeholders**: either the **students** (the Bologna-model that would eventually be replicated at other South European universities) or the **Masters of Arts** (the Paris-model later taken on by Oxford and other North European universities)
- Medieval universities shared a common identity as **general schools (*studia generalia*)**; this identity rested upon:
 - Their autonomy as expressed in both their organisation (designation of officials) and their privilege to award degrees
 - A canon of disciplines that were seen to have a “higher” status (theology, law, medicine and the arts)
 - A shared teaching method with a particular emphasis on the disputation; the latter two characteristics were to be seen as “scholastic” by the Humanists

The Birth of Universities: Interpretation (1)

1. The birth of the universities was a **response** to, rather than the consequence of, the developments of contemporary society:
 - Jacques Le Goff: division of labour
 - Peter Classen and Alexander Murray: needs of a complex society
 - Yet universities departed from the twelfth-century emphasis on specialist training (Steve Fuller)
2. This response had an **emancipatory** aim:
 - Herbert Grundmann vs. Rainer Schwinges: desire to learn (and teach) (*amor sciendi*) vs. reproduction of social stratification
 - Rita Copeland (and William Clark): anti-charismatic (or traditionally charismatic)
 - Yet equality was the most powerful means of emancipation in medieval society

The Birth of Universities: Interpretation (2)

3. It was **society's** emancipation that was sought:

- Stephen Ferruolo: general knowledge (Paris)
- General schools
- Civil authorities could accommodate this claim:
 - Medieval communes: public character and supra-regional organisation
 - Monarchical authorities: desire of knowledge enhances legitimacy of political authorities (Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, *Authentica Habita*, 1158)

The Birth of Universities: The Initiative of Intellectuals

- Universities were created by some of their stakeholders in order to promote the emancipation of a society that was growing complex, but why?
- The promotion of the emancipation of society by higher education presupposes active intellectuals:
 - Intellectuals have mainly been described as (generally) educated people who take as their subject matters of public concern AND have the public attention; it is assumed that the public sphere exists independently from them and that their role is passive
 - Steve Fuller has suggested that more attention be paid to “negative responsibility” of the agents, whereby “the moral worth of an action [is judged] in relation to the available actions not taken by the agent”; the intellectual is, thus, defined “more by cause than effect” and as playing a key role in the development of the public sphere

Intellectuals and Exile (1)

- The students and scholars who created the universities of Bologna and Paris had accepted to live in exile for the sake of studying and teaching:
 - Hugh of St Victor, † 1141: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land.” (*Didascalicon* III 19)
 - Emperor Frederick I, *Authentica Habita*, 1158: scholars as “those who exile themselves through love of learning and wear out in poverty”
- They sought mutual protection by creating universities
- They were aware of the critical dimension of exile
- Petrarca and the Humanists would, by contrast, see individual exile as a condition of knowledge, thus mystifying exile

Intellectuals and Exile (2)

- The alternative between the scholastic and the humanist approaches to exile played an important role in the political discussion among emigrated German intellectuals in World War Two
- Thomas Mann's exchange with Theodor Adorno about the former's novel *Doctor Faustus*, which would be published in 1947, is particularly telling:
 - Theodor Adorno: condition for intransigence of the intellectuals is "not being at home again anywhere"; "he whose business is it to demythologise should not, of course, complain too much about this"
 - Thomas Mann: Serenus Zeitbloom (the novel's narrator) in inner-exile; (negative) correlation between Adrian Leverkühn, whose fictive biography is the novel's subject), and the *polis* (Third-Reich Germany)

Hegemony?

- Exile vs. Gramscian “hegemony” (and “common sense”)
- Hegemony assumes a dichotomy between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals, whereby:
 - The traditional intellectuals are independent from the people
 - The organic intellectuals’ relationship with the people is dialectical
- Exiled scholars did not claim to be independent from the people (contrary to the Humanists) nor was their relationship with the people dialectical (universities were general schools)

“Public sphere”?

- Emancipation vs. Habermas’s “public sphere” (and its anti-authoritarian premise)
- Medieval antecedents of the “public sphere”
- The pre-democratic antecedents of emancipation and universities raise the question of the legitimacy of the “commonwealth of universities” in modern democracies